

# The phonology of Latin ⟨gn⟩-initial stems

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## 0. The issue: the phonological representation and the history of Latin initial ⟨gn⟩

### 1. Internal ⟨gn⟩

as has long been known, internal ⟨gn⟩ = [ɲn]

*ignis iɲnis* ‘fire’, *agnus aɲnus* ‘lamb’ etc. (cf.  
e.g. Allen 1978:23–25)

### 2. Initial ⟨gn⟩

- only in 6 lexical items, of which 5 (or possibly all the 6) go back to 2 PIE roots
- alternates in writing with ⟨n⟩ except for the proper name *Gnaeus*
- initial **ɲn** very odd phonotactically in Latin generally

*Gnaeus* proper name  
*gnarus* (overwhelmingly) ~ *narus* 'skilled'  
*gnatus* (mostly. preclass.) ~ *natus*  
 (overwhelmingly) 'born, son'  
*gnavus* ~ *navus* (more freq.) 'diligent'  
*gnoscere* (sporadically) ~ *noscere* 'know'  
*gnobilis* (only 2 preclass. occurrences) ~  
*nobilis* 'noble'

etymologically:

- \**genh*<sub>3</sub>- (> *gnarus*, *gnavus*, *gnobilis*, cf. E *can*, *know*)
- \**genh*<sub>1</sub>- (> *gnatus*, cf. E *kin*, G *Kind*)

### Claim:

historically **gn-** > [back]**n-** > **n-** initially  
 with a floating [back] at the middle stage

### 3. Prefixed <gn>-initial stems<sup>1</sup>

Clearly appear to belong to two distinct periods. Criteria for earlier period:

- earlier documentation
- greater corpus frequency
- more complete paradigms
- written <gn>
- sometimes more opaque semantics

⇒ **the prefixes *ad-*, *in-*, *con-* figure in earlier forms specifically with <gn>-initial stems, but not the rest of the prefixes!**

**earlier**

*ignoscere, agnoscere*  
*cognatus*  
*ignobilis*

**later**

*praenosocere,*  
*vs. internatus*  
*vs. praenobilis...*

**What is the common feature? The consonants [d] [n] assimilate much more easily than all other consonants.**

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<sup>1</sup> See exhaustive list of data (culled from Brepols CLCLT-5) on handout.

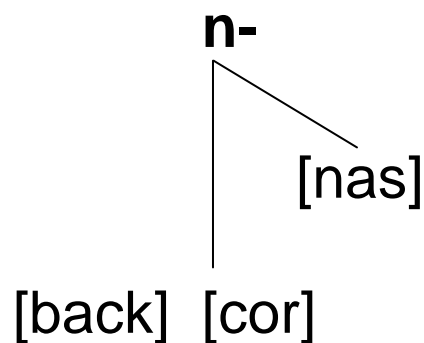
## 4. The historical development of initial ⟨gn⟩

### (i) gn- (from PIE to Pre-(Classical-)Latin)

at this stage there was no phonological motivation for a selective choice of prefixes, since *per* + *gn-* or *dē* + *gn-* etc. was no worse than *ad* + *gn-*

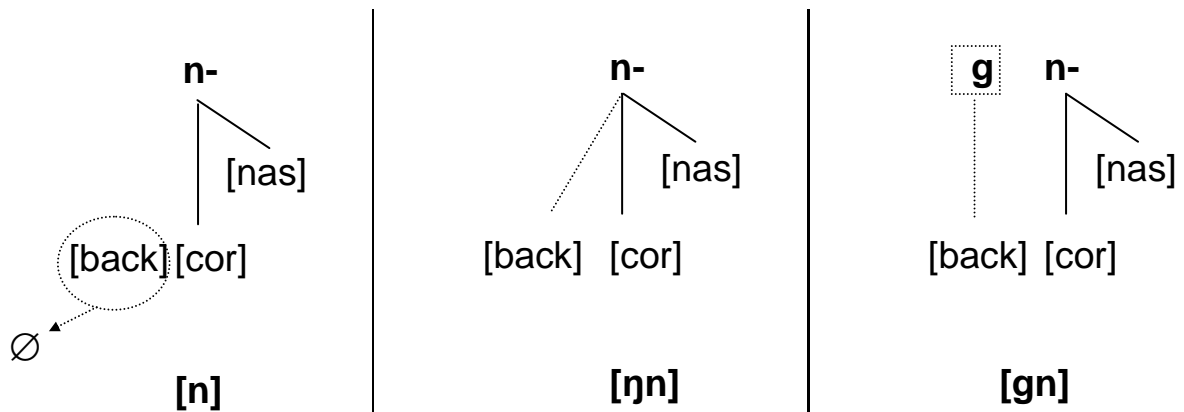
### (ii) floating [back] + n

lexical representation:



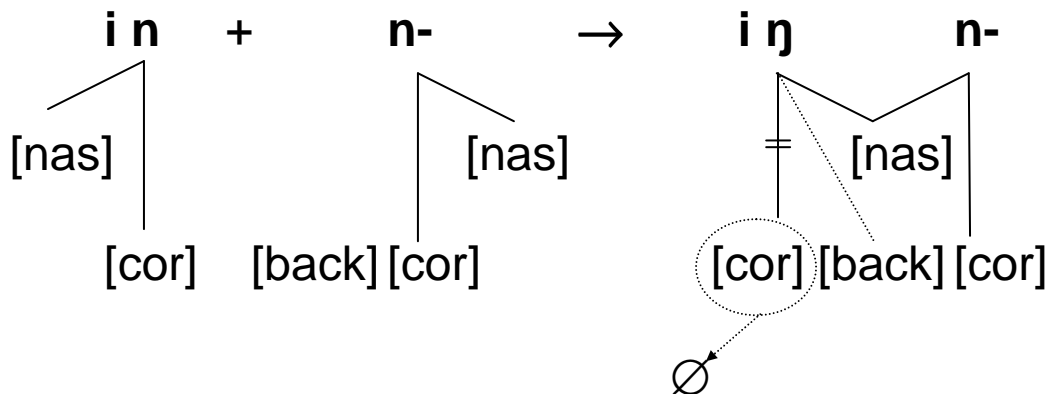
realisation: variable, details no longer recoverable

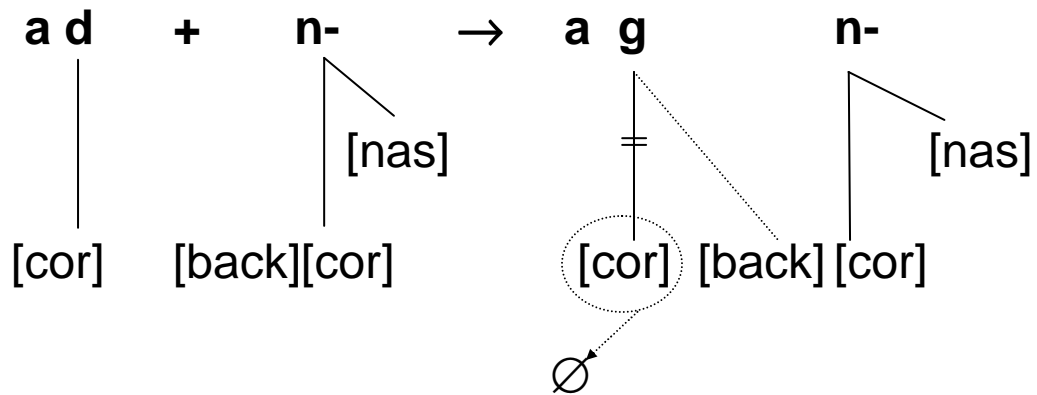
three possible surface realisations:



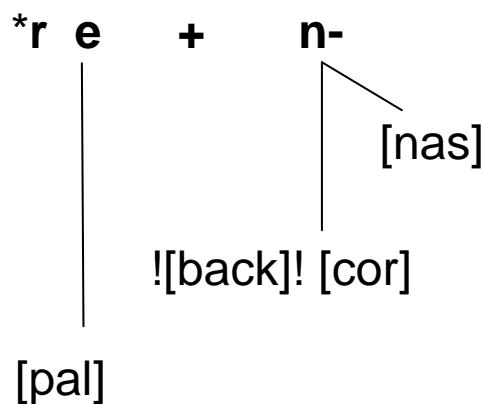
**The floating [back] explains why prefixes ending in vowels or non-assimilating consonants could not attach to <gn>-initial stems:**

***in + gn-:***



**ad + gn-**

(subsequent **gn** > **ɲn** assumed independently)

**\*\*re + gn-**

**If trapped internally, a floating feature makes the word ill-formed.**

NB. place features of vowels and consonants not on the same tier / not attached to the same intermediate nodes, cf. Clements & Hume (1995), Morén (2003) hence **\*\*ronoscere** etc. impossible.

**(iii) relexicalisation (lexical split) without the floating [back]** (in the literary period)

*(g)natus* = *nat* '(he) swims' with plain **n**,  
*cognatus* = *agnus* fully specified **ɲn**

unconstrained prefixation from this point on:  
*renatus*, *praenoscerere*, *pernobilis*

## 5. Problematic words

**Gnaeus** – no vacillation; proper name, scribal conservatism

**prognatus** – evidently of the earlier stock!

- very early lexicalisation?
- analogy of *cognatus*?
- *prod+gnatus*? (*prod* is the prevocalic allomorph of *pro*)

**praegna(n)s** – seems ancient, **jɲn**

phonotactically very odd in Classical Latin, root unattested elsewhere in this form – which could be an argument for early lexicalisation, cf. *prehendere* 'grab', with stem as well as prefix-variant unattested in this form

***innatus*** – ancient, but why not **\*\**ignatus***?

Early sign of vacillation which may have led to free prefixation (cf. *pernoscere*, also attested in the archaic period)? (By the way, only instance of locative *in*.)

***ignominia*** ‘disgrace’, ***cognomen*** ‘~surname’,  
***agnomen*** ‘~nickname’ < X+nomen

— so what is the velar nasal doing there?

Time-honoured explanation: analogy of *gnoscere* (Walde–Hoffmann 1956 s.v. etc.)

## 6. Conclusion

Diachronic distribution of prefixes points to floating [back] feature stem-initially in a transitional period between PIE (initial [gn]) and Classical Latin (initial [n]).

### References

- Allen, William S. (1978<sup>2</sup>) *Vox Latina*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
CLCLT-5 – Library of Latin Texts by Brepols Publishers, Release 2002.
- Clements, George N. & Elizabeth Hume (1995) 'The Internal Organization of Speech Sounds' in Goldsmith (1995), *The Handbook of Phonological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 245–306.
- Morén, Bruce (2003). The parallel structures model of feature geometry. *Working papers of the Cornell phonetics laboratory* 15: ch.5.
- Walde, Alois & Johann B. Hofmann (1956) *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg: Winter

## Appendix: Prefixed ⟨gn⟩-initial stems (exhaustive list)

stem	prefixed form	gloss	comment
(g)narus	<i>ignarus</i>	'ignorant'	much more frequent than (g)narus, and attested all through the period of written Latin
	<i>prognariter</i>	'deftly'	once in Ennius and once in Plautus
	<i>pergnarus</i>	'very deft'	once in Apuleius and once in Sallust (the latter debated)
(g)navus	<i>ignavus</i>	'idle'	much more frequent than (g)navus, attested all through the period of written Latin, and also more complete morphologically in that only <i>ignavus</i> has comparative and superlative forms
nobilis	<i>ignobilis</i>	'ignoble'	very frequent and attested all through the period of written Latin
	<i>pernobilis</i>	'most noble'	first occurrence in Cicero (once), then a handful later
	<i>praenobilis</i>	'most noble'	Apuleius, then Prudentius and a handful later
	<i>cognobilis</i>	'cognisable'	first in M. P. Cato, then a handful in classical and later times, but semantically clearly from <i>cognoscere</i> , not from <i>nobilis</i> (though the stems are etymologically related)
(g)noscere	<i>ignoscere</i>	'forgive'	significantly more frequent than (g)noscere and widely attested in most paradigmatic forms (PERF and third stem forms)
	<i>agnoscere</i> (also ⟨adgn-⟩, ⟨adn-⟩)	'acknowledge'	
	<i>cognoscere</i>	'recognise'	
	<i>pernoscere</i>	'thoroughly know'	fairly rare word; PERF only attested in Plautus and Terence with one exception, third stem not attested at all
	<i>internoscere</i>	'distinguish'	once in Pacuvius, then Lucretius and some occurrences later; third stem not attested at all
	<i>praenoscere</i>	'know in advance'	Cicero, Ovid, then most occurrences in Christian Latin; PERF forms 5 altogether; third stem not attested at all
	<i>dinoscere</i>	'distinguish'	Horace, Ovid, then fairly popular later, especially with Christian writers; PERF forms attested only at the end of the 4 <sup>th</sup> c. AD; third stem not attested at all; the spelling ⟨dignoscere⟩ is introduced by Tertullian (c. AD 200)
	<i>renoscere</i>	'recognise'	first in a 4 <sup>th</sup> c. AD text of dubious authenticity, then a handful of occurrences in the 5 <sup>th</sup> c.; no PERF or third stem forms attested
	<i>recognoscere</i>	'remember'	first attested in Cicero and Virgil, then very frequently, especially in Christian writers
	<i>adcognoscere</i> (also ⟨acc-⟩)	'acknowledge'	handful of occurrences in Varro, Seneca, Petronius, Quintilian and Tertullian
(nō-)	<i>ignorare</i>	'not know'	frequent and attested all through the period of written Latin
(g)natus	<i>cognatus</i>	'relative'	fairly frequent words, attested from earliest times
	<i>prognatus</i>	'son'	
	<i>connatus</i>	'born together'	once in Tertullian, then a handful in later Christian writers
	<i>pronatus</i>	'born'	only in Tertullian and Commodianus
	<i>agnatus</i> (also ⟨adn-, adgn-⟩)	'born after father's death'	once in Accius ( <i>agnatio</i> ), then Varro, Cicero and later
	<i>innatus</i>	'innate'	a fairly rare word, attested from Plautus and Terence on
	<i>enatus</i>	'growing out'	a rare word, first attested in Pacuvius, then in Horace and Livy
	<i>renatus</i>	'born again'	attested with some frequency from Lucretius onwards, popular especially with Christians
	<i>internatus</i>	'growing between'	a rare word, first attested in Livy
	<i>subnatus</i>	'growing underneath'	hapax in a 1 <sup>st</sup> c. BC text of dubious authorship
-gna(n)t-	<i>praegna(n)s</i>	'pregnant'	frequent and attested from earliest times on; stem in this form only occurs in this particular word